DEBBIE NEOCLEOUS

Recipe for success

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Anyone with a sweet tooth will undoubtedly be familiar with Debbie’s Cookies. For those who aren’t, simply one bite into her delicious Real American Chocolate Chip Cookies will be enough to turn them into regular customers. This native of Albany, New York has brought to our little Mediterranean island the quintessential American snack: the chocolate chip cookie – and so much more! Debbie's Cookies, the Old Fashioned American Bakery, carries all manner of authentic American goodies, as one look at the mouth-watering menu will show you. From nine different cookie recipes – including one made with homemade peanut butter – to a variety of muffins and buns, there is something for everyone. Debbie makes sure to cater to the fasting Cypriot population during the months of Lent with her 'Netissima' sweets, as well as to those who long for a taste of home at Christmas-time, with her Traditional English-style Christmas cake. And let’s not forget those holidays in between, where customers can choose from Pumpkin pies for a Thanksgiving feast, as well as customized birthday cakes for that extra-special day. Debbie brought her passion for cookies over to Cyprus from America twenty years ago, and has not looked back since. We managed to catch up with her during her very busy day running her constantly-expanding, dynamic business and found out a little bit more about the woman behind some of the tastiest treats on the island.

Where did you grow up and how did you end up in Cyprus? And how are you enjoying our little island?
I grew up in a small town in up-state New York (near the capital Albany). We had 5 horses and a country-style home. My parents taught me the value of hard work and doing things for oneself in order to succeed. We never had the luxury of idle time. The typical American lifestyle of the time (60s, 70s, 80s) was not for our family. We didn’t watch much television – in fact our television was a small black and white 14” for the longest time. It wasn’t a matter of not being able to afford it – it just wasn’t a priority. We enjoyed the outdoors (100 acres of land and forest), and my father liked to take us on trips. Although I lived in the countryside I went to a private all girls school in Albany and then the University of Albany where I met my husband (part of the Cypriot contingent there). We both transferred to Ithaca to continue our education. I visited Cyprus for the first time in 1985 (very different from how it is now), again in 1987 and then I moved here in 1989. When someone asks how I like Cyprus I just say “I hope I wouldn’t still be here after 20 years if I didn’t like it” – I guess that means I like it. I’ve made my life here.
What made you decide to open up Debbie’s Cookies?
The passion for the product and the desire to be my own boss. Mainly it was the product I was passionate about – a real American Chocolate Chip Cookie.

Are there any particular pastry chefs or specific recipes that you have been influenced by?
Not really. I try to keep my choices of products to typical American products. I have the delectable Cypriot desserts to the Cypriot bakeries.

Of all your recipes, which is your personal favourite?
The Chocolate Chip Cookie, followed by the Cheesecake and then the Lemon Poppy Seed Cake. Oh, I also love my ‘Kotissia Walnut Raisin Cookies’ for the fasting periods.

Do you still enjoy cookies, brownies and cakes or have you found that after making them for so long, they have lost their charm?
I always enjoy a good dessert, but I try not to have them too often so that I can enjoy them when I do have them. Too much of anything makes it boring after a while.

Do you often try out new recipes or do you find that you stick to the tried-and-tested that you know your customers love?
I’m always working on something new. Research and Development is really what I do these days. It’s impossible for all new ideas to succeed but most new products do. We try to introduce a new recipe to the market every six months. Once we do, they are usually a hit.

If you do try new recipes, on whom do you test them out?
My Guinea Pigs are my husband Elmos, my son, followed by close friends.

A lot of your products are American-based – peanut butter, New York cheese cake, and chocolate chip, which is the most American cookie you can get – though you do also offer English-style Christmas cakes. Do you ever get British customers asking for special requests from their home-country?
We try to stick to this niche of old-fashioned American products you can’t find anywhere else because this is who we are – and we’re good at it. I do English style Christmas Cakes because I like them and because there is really no American equivalent. We do have similar “fruit cakes” in the States – we just don’t call them Xmas cakes. Traditional English bakery products however are very close to the American ones, so there is no real deviation here. Regarding special requests from British customers, it hasn’t really happened yet. I guess they are content with what we have to offer.

What is your clientele usually made up of?
I have clientele of many types and backgrounds. Our first supporters however were Americans, British and Cypriots who lived or studied in the US or the UK and knew the products. This didn’t last long though. Within a few months the Cypriot clients have outnumbered them all. Occasionally, I will still get a new American in town longing for a taste of home (that’s how I ended up doing this).

Are you thinking of expanding to other towns in Cyprus as well? I’m from Limassol myself, and I know Limassolians would love a Debbie’s cookies in their town! We would definitely like to expand to other cities. It’s in our future plans and we will do it as soon as we can. You may be able to find us soon at the Alfamega Hypermarket in Limassol. You can also find some of our products in Franchise Cafeterias around the island (i.e. Gloria Jeans Coffees and Coffee Beanery).

How do you spend your day when you’re not busy in the shop?
The gym, meeting with friends, family time and I am also on the Board of a couple of clubs. Love to travel! I long for adventure.

Are there any other areas you wish to explore in the future, other than Debbie’s Cookies?
I would like to become a writer of fiction, either novels or film scripts. You’re probably wondering how I can become a writer if I am unable to answer these questions in detail. The answer is that I find it easier to write fiction than facts about myself.

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“My usual Guinea Pig (for testing new recipes) is my husband Elmos, then my son, followed by close friends.”

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**Lemon Poppy Seed Cake**

250g Flour, 250g Sugar
1 grated Lemon Rind, 4 Eggs
20g Poppy Seeds, 250g Butter (unsalted)
Fresh Lemon Juice from the lemon used for the rind

Cream the butter and sugar. Add the eggs one at a time, followed by one spoon of flour until all eggs and flour have been incorporated into the mix. Fold in poppy seeds, lemon juice and lemon rind.

Grease cake tin with unsalted butter. Deposit into a cake tin (usually a bund tin), Bake at 160ºC for 30-40 minutes. Check with a wooden skewer for doneness.